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Have you ever heard of 'stealthing?'



STEVE SCHMIDT

APR 25, 2023



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April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Today's essay is guest written by Emma Schwartz, an 18-year-old close friend of my daughter, who, unfortunately, was the victim of *stealthing*. As a result of her experience, she recently launched *The Adjacent Project*, which seeks to advocate for the passage of non-consensual condom removal legislation.



18-year-old Emma Schwartz stands outside of the Utah State Legislature

"I knew that you were safe and you didn't."



18-year-old Emma Schwartz stands outside of the Utah State Legislature

"I knew that you were safe and you didn't."

On December 18, 2021, my then-boyfriend removed his condom without my knowledge or consent. The following day, a text he sent me included the message above. That text, along with his actions, will haunt me for the rest of my life.

First, a general word about safety from me, a young woman from whom it was taken in an instant. Women are, in fact, never safe. To be a woman is to be scared, and to be cautious. So many men will never fully understand what it feels like to be frightened simply for being female. They will never know what it feels like to walk, as a woman, solo, under a dark sky. They will never look repetitively over their shoulder before getting into their car, or lock it the second they are inside. They will never walk down a street and have men say things about their body. Or touch their body. They will never be scared to take an Uber. They will never intuitively cover their drink with their hand. Or own a **drink condom**. They will never have to second guess their clothing choice.

Do men ever get a **Birdie** in their Christmas stocking? Do men arrive at college to see that their randomly assigned roommate from across the country brought the exact same Birdie to campus? Do they even know what a Birdie is?

How about an **angel shot**?

Do laws dictate men's right to bodily autonomy?

As a society, we make sure that girls know the rules. They are relentlessly ingrained into our still-forming brains. Early, and often. Along with my peers, I was taught — ad nauseam — how to keep myself safe. Yet, that night, I was powerless over my own safety. My choice to stay safe, to play by the rules, was taken. Without my knowledge. Without my consent. That night, I had no say.

But today, I do. I have spent the better part of the last 16 months healing, researching, listening, learning, advocating, and mostly, trying to make sense of the senseless. Not necessarily in that order.

Why did this happen to me? Why? I may never find the answer to that question, but in searching, I've focused my attention on education and prevention, so that one day, others have choices within the judicial system that I did not have.

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The night of my assault I knew something terrible happened to me. Scared and upset, I — then a 17-year-old needing information — resorted to a Google search in a private browser at 2:30 am (my first official night as an insomniac). *"Is it assault if my boyfriend removed his condom without my consent?"*

Yes.

— then a 17-year-old needing information — resorted to a Google search in a private browser at 2:30 am (my first official night as an insomniac). *“Is it assault if my boyfriend removed his condom without my consent?”*

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Yes, it is.

“Non-consensual condom removal,” said Google. A behavior and problem so prevalent that it not only had a nickname — “stealthing” — but a range of definitions largely dependent on geography, **the most severe** being a rape crime punishable by a maximum sentence of life in prison in the United Kingdom. In the United States, however, there was little to no legal definition of this act, which remains the case to this day. The first and only piece of legislation — **adopted** by California in 2021 — recognizes stealthing in the state’s civil sexual battery code and allows victims to sue for damages.

We must change that.

A 2019 study **revealed** that 12 percent of females are victims of non-consensual condom removal, and 10 percent of males admit to doing it. Other studies **suggest** female victimization rates are as high as 43 percent. Potential consequences for victims are severe, the most notable is an unwanted pregnancy.

With abortion access becoming more restrictive on a seemingly daily basis, U.S. lawmakers must take the necessary steps to criminalize this form of assault. As a victim, it must be said that the emotional consequences of stealthing, while far less headline-grabbing than the potential for unwanted pregnancy or transmission of STIs, are equally serious. PTSD, depression, anxiety, insomnia — not to mention a complete lack of trust in humanity — coursed through my body at every second for a solid year. My reactions are not atypical.

The reminders are constant and plentiful, and in my own experience, mostly stem from simply existing. Waking up in the morning quickly became the acknowledgement that there was another day of agony waiting for me. Though the agony (thankfully) slightly wanes with the passage of time, the last moment I truly looked at myself in the mirror — really saw myself — was December 18, 2021. The tear stains on my red cheeks and the brokenness in my own eyes will be an image I never bury.

It is long overdue that, as a society, we not only see victims of sexual assault, but believe and support them through both action and legislation. Setting legal precedents in every state is a necessary step to protect the people you love from non-consensual behaviors.





Emma Schwartz with Senator Mike McKell (R-Spanish Fork, Utah) with whom she worked to criminalize stealthing at the Utah State Legislature

While testifying in the Utah State House this past session, criminal defense attorney Mark Moffat **argued** that amending the sexual assault statute to include the intentional removal of a sexually protective barrier will be...

...prosecuted against men, and the persons that are going to be most at risk for the prosecution of this particular crime are going to be young, inexperienced boys and men.

Sam Knight, criminal defense attorney, **added** in his testimony that:

...at best we think it introduces and casts a wide net over the naivety of some of these inexperienced young men who are sexually active.

Since when is youth, inexperience or naivety an excuse to assault someone? If you make the mature decision to have sexual relations with another person, it must be consensual no matter your age or level of experience. As survivor and activist Chanel Miller **said** in her eloquent victim impact statement:

As a society, we cannot forgive everybody's first sexual assault...it doesn't make sense...we cannot create a culture that suggests we learn (it) is wrong through trial and error.

In essence, these attorneys are doing just that, and subsequently prioritizing the safety and security of the naive, young, inexperienced male over the female he hurt. History, and the present, show that they are far from alone in their thinking. Although this critical legislation **passed** the Utah Senate unanimously, testimony from the aforementioned attorneys helped block it from moving past the House Law Enforcement Committee hearing.

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What will it take for the world to understand that women have futures too? Nobody is worried about the women and girls that continue with their work or school day with their assailant merely feet away. How is it that a woman is supposed to succeed in an environment that never supported, defended, or believed her — one that, instead, upheld the systemic, archaic narrative that pushed for the “inexperienced boys and men” to be given a freebie, a do-over, another chance without so much as a slap on the wrist in an effort to preserve their futures and their dreams. What about girls’ futures?

My future was forever altered as a result of being stealthed. Absolutely distraught over the thought of seeing my assailant in the hallways, parking lot, or in passing, I rushed to the school bathroom to throw up every morning for almost a month. Six weeks into a consistent decline in my mental health forced the decision to switch to a home health program, whereby I would complete my senior year of high school online. That was only the beginning of my journey. Meanwhile, the boy, the same one who texted, “I believe that this is less important than it might seem to you” enjoyed the remainder of his senior year uninterrupted.

He could not have been more wrong. This is the most important thing that has happened in my life. My healing and my way forward is to do as much as I possibly can to raise awareness in an attempt to prevent stealthing from happening to others, and to change laws for future victims should it occur. That’s why I started **The Adjacent Project**.*

Although April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month and the impetus for this essay, we cannot forget that non-consensual condom removal is a year-round problem. If we have any hope of preventing stealthing, we must define it legally as sexual assault to give victims a clear path to justice. And, we must talk about it — to people with penises. Early, and often.

*The Adjacent Project is a small, grassroots group dedicated to shining a light on the seriousness of non-consensual condom removal and the need for legislation that clearly defines it as sexual assault. We are in our infancy, and need all the support we can gather. For more information, **follow us** or DM us on Instagram. It takes a village to change both culture and laws. Help us by spreading the word. Talk to the people in your lives about stealthing. Write to your state and federal representatives and express the need for anti-stealthing legislation. Send inquiries to **contact@theadjacentproject.us** to get involved.

NOTE: Emma wishes to acknowledge the prevalence and seriousness of stealthing for victims of all genders, but writes from her own perspective as a female stealthed by a male.

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Lisa Beardsley Apr 25 · edited Apr 25 ❤️ Liked by Steve Schmidt

Emma Schwartz, I commend you, and cannot thank you enough for bringing attention to 'stealthing'. You have integrated a personal traumatic sexual assault experience and have risen up to create awareness to protect other women; you have created a forum for women to share and to gain critically important information about sexual assault -and that stealthing is a crime. I have been through a similar experience, although it involved a sleeping drug. I was shaking and had tears while I read what you've written here because trauma is held in the body. If we can talk about our experiences and be validated that we have been raped, then we can begin to heal. I dearly hope that women who have suffered from stealthing and related rapes will be empowered to speak out in the ways you have. All men of all ages need to understand the rights of women, their bodies and their voices. Thank you Steve Schmidt. You give me hope for how men can honor women's rights, autonomy, and Voices. Emma, you are my Heroin. Keep Going and so many of us will join you.

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Martha Hoag Apr 25 ❤️ Liked by Steve Schmidt

Thank you ❤️ With the current climate about a woman's right to do just about anything related to our bodily autonomy, I am not surprised at the response to protect the *young man* - it's his "mistake", but the woman's "regret" that plagues our culture - I can't go on.....I'm exhausted from being an American woman.... I think exhausting us was some kind of plan.

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